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RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA PRIORITY 2126  
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD PRIORITY 9160  
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU PRIORITY 7406  
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 5280  
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 3558  
RUEHNY/AMEMBASSY OSLO PRIORITY 5211  
RUEHOT/AMEMBASSY OTTAWA PRIORITY 0079  
RUEHSM/AMEMBASSY STOCKHOLM PRIORITY 0746  
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 4328  
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI PRIORITY 9721  
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI PRIORITY 7012  
RUEHON/AMCONSUL TORONTO PRIORITY 0067  
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY  
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 3882  
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RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 COLOMBO 001113

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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INSB

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PREF](#) [PHUM](#) [PTER](#) [EAID](#) [MOPS](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA ABUZZ OVER FONSEKA CANDIDACY, BUT  
GENERAL FACES UPHILL BATTLE

REF: A. COLOMBO 1073

[1](#)B. COLOMBO 1061

[1](#)C. COLOMBO 1094

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Classified By: CHARGE D' AFFAIRES VALERIE C. FOWLER. REASONS: 1.4 (B,  
D)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY. The announcements of an early presidential election January 26 and of General Fonseka's candidacy have dramatically altered the political landscape in Sri Lanka and created a palpable sense of new possibilities. But the general is likely to face an uphill battle in his attempt to defeat President Rajapaksa. While Fonseka has certain political and personal advantages running in his favor, the general will have to overcome several significant political and logistical hurdles if he is to have a realistic chance of beating Rajapaksa in what a prominent Sri Lankan daily termed "the most bitterly fought presidential battle ever to be held in the country." END SUMMARY.

Here Comes the General  
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[1](#)2. (C) On November 29, former Army Commander and then-CHOD General Sarath Fonseka officially announced his long-awaited decision to run as the opposition's common candidate in the upcoming presidential election. Fonseka's announcement at a news conference was the first time he publicly acknowledged his decision to run for president (though opposition parties had been declaring Fonseka as the opposition's candidate for several days). Fonseka will be officially nominated as a candidate on December 17. Although several minor candidates also may run, the election is widely expected to be a two-man race between Fonseka and President Rajapaksa.

Political Wind at Fonseka's Back...  
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13. (C) For certain segments of the electorate -- especially the opposition -- General Fonseka's entry into the race has generated a level of excitement and political interest that has not been seen since the last presidential election in 2005. Along with a general level of fanfare surrounding his candidacy, Fonseka has several advantages going for his presidential campaign:

-- He's a Sinhalese nationalist: Fonseka is widely recognized as a hardline Sinhalese nationalist and probably is one of the few (if only) candidates that could chip away at votes from President Rajapaksa's Sinhalese base in the southern part of the country. Embassy interlocutors generally agree that a Fonseka candidacy would split the Sinhalese nationalist vote down the middle. As Tamil National Alliance Leader R. Sampanthan noted, "A crack has appeared in the Sinhalese nationalist edifice." Fonseka's previous hardline comments declaring that Sri Lanka was for the Sinhalese and his lead military role in defeating the LTTE suggest that Fonseka would have to spend little campaign time convincing the population that he values the Sinhalese population's interests and thus can focus on wooing minority Tamil and Muslim voters and moderate Sinhalese voters. Fonseka also is likely to garner support from hardline voters who think Fonseka has been treated poorly by the government after the defeat of the LTTE.

-- Opposition reenergized: Fonseka's candidacy has reenergized the opposition, including the main opposition party UNP, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), and the hardline JVP. The UNP has generally languished since losing the 2005 election and has lost eight provincial council

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elections in a row. The emergence of Fonseka has energized the opposition because they view the former General as the best route to removing President Rajapaksa from power. Fonseka's alliance with the main opposition parties most likely would allow him to exploit the respective strengths of each party in the UNP, including the UNP's strength with urban voters, minorities, and liberal Sinhalese, the JVP's widespread grassroots networks, and the minority parties' influence in the north and the east.

-- "It's the economy, stupid": Local observers assess that the defeat of the LTTE, while certainly welcomed, has dropped in the minds of many voters; the economy and rampant corruption have replaced the war as the predominate issues in the minds of many middle-class voters. Post's interlocutors have opined that Fonseka probably was well-positioned to gain support from voters who were concerned with the high cost of living and the general feeling on the street that "you have to be a Rajapaksa to get something accomplished."

-- Presidential before the parliamentary election: Some Embassy contacts have opined that Fonseka probably benefited from President Rajapaksa's decision to hold a presidential election before the parliamentary election. While Fonseka noted that he would run in a general election, interlocutors believe that President Rajapaksa could simply have delayed a presidential election with a poor UPFA result in a general election and dissolved parliament in a year -- a scenario that probably would have made it more difficult for Fonseka to wrestle the presidency from Rajapaksa.

...But a Long Climb to the Top  
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14. (C) While Fonseka has certainly energized the opposition and has an increasingly favorable political climate in which to contest the presidential election, Fonseka still faces numerous political and logistical challenges to wrestle the mantle from President Rajapaksa:

-- Courting Tamil/Muslim voters: Local observers generally

agreed that minority voters, mainly the Tamils and Muslims, would be the crucial swing vote in a tight race between Fonseka and Rajapaksa. Fonseka's past hardline comments and his former role as Army chief were likely to make his task of wooing crucial minority constituencies more difficult. Many minority voters and political parties hold Fonseka personally responsible for the deaths of many Tamils in the waning days of the war, a fact that is likely to make it more difficult for Fonseka to win over a badly-needed constituency. Prominent Tamil leaders have threatened to launch an independent bid for the presidency; a event that probably would draw voters from the opposition.

-- No political base: Fonseka's reliance on a united opposition probably will help him mobilize different constituencies around the country, but it will also force him to rely on other figures, especially UNP chief Ranil Wickremesinghe, to accomplish key political tasks. Some observers believe Fonseka would have to rely on Wickremesinghe to soothe over apprehensions within key domestic and foreign (i.e. India) constituencies over a recently-retired Army chief running for president. Fonseka most likely will also struggle to coordinate a coherent campaign with political parties of the UNF campaigning independently on his behalf.

-- Policy views a mystery: Fonseka's views on a range of domestic and foreign policies remain a mystery to many voters. Given that his entire career was in the military,

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Fonseka, unlike Rajapaksa, does not have a track record of public statements or policy positions -- a fact that probably compounds the distrust minority voters feel towards the general. Fonseka outlined key policy principles in his resignation letter from the military and the announcement of his candidacy, including the restoration of democracy and implementation of key constitutional amendments, but embassy contacts have noted that many voters were likely to view these statements as mere rhetoric designed to win votes.

-- Keeping the opposition united: The alliance of opposition parties backing Fonseka is made up of parties that share little in common ideologically; a fracture of the alliance almost certainly would hurt Fonseka's prospects in the upcoming election. The parties are only united by their desire to defeat President Rajapaksa and, secondarily, by their focus on abolishing the executive presidency. Influential party leaders in the UNP have already threatened to leave the UNF and probably would take key party members and vote banks with them.

-- Achieving a level playing field: Our contacts uniformly believed that the upcoming election was likely to be fraught with widespread election violence and efforts by the incumbent government to exploit state resources, including media, buildings, and equipment, to gain an upperhand in the election. The lack of an independent Election Commission (NOTE: President Rajapaksa has failed to implement the 17th amendment to the constitution, which would guarantee the independence of the Election Commission. END NOTE.) will impede efforts to enforce a level playing field during the pre-election, election, and post-election period. Furthermore, areas that the opposition is likely to count on for votes -- such as the north and the east -- are likely to be the areas that will struggle the most for voter turnout and a level electoral playing field.

-- Countering President Rajapaksa's political skills: Despite the many hurdles facing his candidacy, Fonseka's biggest challenge may be facing a natural politician. Known for his political skills and campaigning ability, Rajapaksa has already begun adapting to the new political environment. He has made significant concessions to the Tamils in the past few weeks, including opening of the A-9 road, allowing freedom of movement in the IDP camps, and allowing opposition

members to visit the camps -- all moves probably designed, in part, to curry favor with Tamil voters. Several Embassy Tamil contacts have noted that some minorities, while not in favor of Rajapaksa, would feel more comfortable voting for Rajapaksa because he is a natural politician and someone that could be approached.

-- Winning Campaign Strategy?: Opposition contacts, including UNP chief Wickremesinghe, have told Emboffs that they planned on running a campaign based on restoring democracy, reducing corruption, and the general misdeeds of the Rajapaksa brothers. Non-opposition contacts, however, believe the election was likely to be decided on economic issues, including reducing the cost of living. Wickremesinghe told the Charge in a late November meeting that the UNP had campaigned on the economy before, but had failed to gain any traction. Fonseka's unique mix of campaign themes probably will play a significant role in deciding the election outcome.

Comment

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15. (C) Sri Lanka is abuzz with excitement over the upcoming presidential election. While many questions remain about the

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general and his plans and policies, there is a palpable feeling in the country of new political possibilities. But Fonseka faces considerable hurdles going forward. Keeping a prominent Tamil leader -- such as the TNA's Sampanthan -- out of the presidential race and ensuring an even electoral playing field probably are the most immediate challenges facing the general.

16. (C) Opposition leaders and local embassy contacts insist that a robust international election monitoring presence will be essential for the opposition to have a chance of upsetting President Rajapaksa. With a shortened campaign period, local election monitors are scrambling to organize. Post has requested a meeting with the Election Commissioner and will report results of the meeting septel.

FOWLER